

Elitsur Haokip (born in Manipur, c. 1936)

Sometimes my mother would take one of us to the fields with her. Once she took my second eldest brother. It was evening when they returned. On the path near our house they saw an animal that looked like a dog. “Your uncle Khupao and his dog have come to visit,” my mother said. As my brother started to run toward it, the animal turned around and let out a menacing growl. It was a *lhumpi* [wild jungle cat]. My mother always kept a machete in her *beng* [a backpack made of fine woven bamboo]. She grabbed it just as the *lhumpi* leaped toward them and she sliced off its two front paws.

If you mother was away in the fields all day, who cooked for the family?

When we were younger, my older sisters cooked. I helped.

What did you make?

Rice dishes, corn dishes, all kinds of things. The gravy for the rice was easy to make. You could find all the ingredients in our garden or growing near the house. My mother told us each morning what to cook.

Did you eat meat?

We sometimes ate chicken. We had pigs, too. And my father and older brothers laid traps in the nearby jungle and hunted. We had guns and made our own gunpowder. There was another time when my mother took my older sisters and brothers to the paddy fields with her. While they were there, she saw a baby deer in the jungle. She ran it down, tied it up, and told them to keep an eye on it. They thought it was a goat and played with it until it broke loose, so she chased it and caught it again.

And you ate it?

We did. Besides the rice paddies, we also had a field where we grew cotton.

Did you spin yarn from it?

Yes. My mother had a spindle and wove clothing from the yarn. Most of the time, I wore a *boitong* [a sleeveless smock] that she made. When we were young, we hardly had any clothes and went about half-naked. As I grew older, I became more self-conscious and my father bought me a *deil* [a cloth wrap longer than a loin cloth but shorter than a sarong] to wear beneath the *boitong*.

How about pots and dishes? Did you make them, too?

There was a time when pottery was made in the village, but most people in my generation bought such things in Imphal..

What did the young children do while their parents were at work?

There was no school in our village. We helped fetch water, firewood, and things like that, but we were too young to be of much use and we spent most of our time playing.

We liked playing with tops. We carved them from wood. One boy would spin his top and the other would spin his and try knocking the first boy's top down. The last top still spinning was the winner.

We played at wrestling, at throwing spears. We swung from ropes to see who could swing the furthest. We had a game in which we held hands in a circle around a child who had to break out of it. The child kept crouching and jumping, looking for an opening. Whoever let it get through was next in the circle.

Was everyone in the village a Haokip like you?

Yes. The Haokips were a Kuki clan. We were all related, although I can't say how closely. If another Kuki came to the village, he was welcomed with a meal; a chicken was slaughtered in his honor and he was served *zu* [rice wine]. But if he was a Tangkhul or a Milong [two Naga tribes], he would be turned away. The saying was, "I thought I heard a man speak, but when I went to the door, it was only a Naga." If the stranger spoke the language of your tribe like a native, he had to be put up for the night.

Did any English speakers come to your village in those days?

I remember that during the Japanese War [World War II], some people came who spoke English and Hindi. They were Indians. During the war, there was also a company of Japanese soldiers stationed near our village. My family sold them livestock and goats. At first we used sign language, but eventually I learned some Japanese. Today I've forgotten it all.

Were there any Christians in the village?

Not then. Christianity started to come in via the younger people in the mid-1960s. The chief and village elders weren't happy about it and destroyed the first Christian church. They gathered to discuss such matters during the *kut* [holiday] of Ahkang Tha Ni [the sacrifice of the white rooster]. They decided against having the church and the villagers tore it down.

Tell us about this holiday.

It took place in March-April, in the month of Llaphul, at the full moon. Our ancestors went by the phases of the moon. They didn't have solar months like January or February.

What else was done on Ahkang Thang Ni?

The *kut* had three days : The first was called Muol Siel Tha Ni [the Day of the Sacrifice of the Bison] or Changlhah Suh Ni [the day of preparing the changlhah]. On it everyone went to a *khomuol* [raised mound] outside the village and a *siel* [bison] was sacrificed to Pathen. The village priest was in charge of this. On this day, too, every family went to the jungle to fetch materials for a new *doibuom* [a bamboo box containing specified ritual objects] for the coming year. The *doibuom* was hung from the roof of the family's house by a ropelike jungle vine. That evening, we soaked rice in water and pounded it into a fine flour. We added water to the flour to make a dough, wrapped the dough in banana leaves, and boiled it in a pot. This boiled bread was called *changlhah*. If such bread was made at other times of the year, we used yeast, but on Changlhah Suh Ni no yeast was allowed..

The next day was called Chol So Lou Changlhah Neh Ni [the day of eating bread without yeast]. That's when the bread was eaten. There was no particular ritual involved in eating it. It was eaten at home, after which the children of each family took a few pieces of it wrapped in their leaves and brought them to relatives and grandparents, who gave them their own *changlhah* in return. This day was also called Nudon Chan Ni [the day of not touching the grass], because cutting or plucking a blade of grass, or even stepping on one, was forbidden. Any transgressor had to atone with a pot of *zu* [rice wine] and a full-grown chicken.

The third day was a day of feasting. All the villagers, men and women, young and old, gathered at the chief's house for a feast at which the older people blessed the children with health and long lives. I remember taking part in all this up to the time I became a Christian in 1965.

How about the sacrifice of the white rooster?

The sacrifice of the white rooster was a family affair. It was done at home. The sacrifice of the *siel* [bison] was done publicly by a priest like my father.

Did he recite a chant or prayer when he performed it?

There were different chants. My father would have a special vial of *zu* by his side, the priest's wine. He would swallow a mouthful and say, if the sacrificed animal was a *siel*:

“Hei Yah!
Pathen, be pleased!
Creator of the *siel*, be pleased!”

Then he would say to the *siel*:

Do not think that you are being slaughtered today
Like a beast or wild animal.
I am doing it as my forefathers did.
I am doing it as my fathers did,
For the health and welfare of all.
Pathen sent you to dwell among men.
Today, I have a mission for you.
Do not grieve, do not feel badly,
Do not think of yourself as a wild animal.
I am peacefully asking you to help me please Pathen.

Until when did your father continue to officiate as a priest?

Until he died in August, 1956. By then, I was in school in Imphal. In 1952, when I was 16, the Indian government sent a teacher to our village to start a Lower Primary school. I studied there for two years, and then my father, who encouraged me to continue my studies, sent me to a Middle English School in Imphal. I wasn't a very good student but I did try hard. One day, two men from Loibung came to bring me home. They had been told to tell me that my father was seriously ill and wished to see me. In fact, he he had already died.

I started to cry for my father. We were supposed to start out for the village early the next morning. I waited for the two men but they didn't come. They had gone to fetch an older sister of mine and hadn't returned, and so I decided to set out by myself. Public transportation in those days was a truck with benches that weren't attached to the floor. Every time you hit a rock or pothole, the benches jumped and everyone fell off. .

The truck took me as far as the village of Sajal. From there I had to reach Loibung on foot along a path that ran through the village of Dangpi. Dusk was falling and it began to rain heavily. As I walked through Dingpi, I was told my father was dead. I was offered a pinewood torch, but I didn't take it because I didn't think it would last all the way to Loibung. By now it was very dark. Although I had walked the path many times, the rain had turned it to mud and rivulets of water. It was hard going and I lay down on a rock to catch my breath. As I was resting there, I suddenly thought: what am I doing here?

When I looked around, I saw only darkness. I was afraid. All I could think of was my fear. I couldn't even think of my father's death. I started out again and came to a crossroads on a hill. One way led to the Imphal Valley; the other, to my village. It was a place for *theilseh*. That meant breaking off a branch and laying it on the ground to tell the *thilhas*, the guardians of the jungle, that you were passing through.

It was a request for safe passage?

Yes. I knew I was nearing Loibung when I started hearing voices. Although my father had just died, I felt nothing. I came to the edge of the jungle and reached the *aikam* [a gateway at the entrance to a village]. In the village, I saw a bale of hay and lay down on it to rest before continuing to my family's home. Just then there was a noise on the path below me. It was an odd noise for that hour of a rainy night. I suddenly remembered the old folks saying that a dead man's soul was carried away by a great animal. It comforted me to think that that's what I was hearing – the great animal carrying away my father's soul. It gave me peace of mind and I praised Pathen.